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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest examines the extent of early school leaving among migrants, conditions that precede early school leaving, common features of programs that work to retrieve dropouts, and illustrative programs that exhibit these features. The Migrant Attrition Project estimates a 45% national dropout rate of migrant students. Conditions that lead to early school leaving are: (1) overage grade placement; (2) poverty; (3) interrupted school attendance; (4) inconsistent recordkeeping; and (5) limited English proficiency. "Dropout retrieval" is the effort to identify dropouts and help them complete high school diplomas. Effective features of dropout retrieval programs focus on academics, vocational training, and support services. The High School Equivalency Program provides migrant dropouts the chance to prepare for the General Equivalency Development Test (GED) in a residential program on a college campus or in a commuter program. The Migrant Dropout Reconnection Program in Geneseo, New York, offers referral services to 16- to 21-year-old migrant dropout youth. Family literacy programs, including the Even Start program, address intergenerational literacy. The Migrant Alternative School in Yakima, Washington, provides GED preparation in both English and Spanish, ESL instruction, basic skills, vocational training, counseling for employment and college planning, and some credit-bearing classes for students who return to high school. Work study can also help students develop occupational skills and earn needed income. (KS)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools May 1991

# Migrant Students Who Leave School Early: Strategies for Retrieval

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THIS DIGEST examines the extent of early school leaving among migrants, conditions that precede early school leaving, common features of programs that work to retrieve dropouts, and illustrative programs that exhibit these features. The discussion of the predicament of migrant students, however, recognizes that retrieval programs *must* be adapted to local contexts.

**The importance of dropout retrieval among migrant students**

Migrant students have the lowest graduation rate in the public school system (Johnson, Levy, Morales, Morse, & Prokop, 1986). And in recent years, the educational system has rightly paid a good deal of attention to techniques for *preventing* early school leaving. However, because so many migrant youth leave school before they graduate, prevention is just part of the effort required to ensure that migrant students complete high school. "Dropout retrieval," the effort to identify and help dropouts complete high school diplomas, is the other part.

Migrant youth are *difficult to retrieve*, however, because of their mobility, comparatively greater need for financial support, and early family responsibilities. Strategies for meeting this challenge must include ways to accommodate the reality of migrant students' circumstances.

**The extent of dropping out among migrants**

The conditions that make dropout retrieval difficult also make difficult the collection of data about the extent of the problem. Two studies, however, corroborate the fact that the dropout rate for this group remains very high.

The Migrant Attrition Project conducted a study for the U.S. Department of Education that showed a 45 percent national dropout rate (Migrant Attrition Project, 1987), with a margin of error of ±4 percent. A cooperative effort among states serving high proportions of migrant students, the study used a national, stratified random sample of 1,000 migrant students. The only comparable study, done 12 years earlier, had reported a 90 percent dropout rate. The more recent study concluded that, overall, strategies to support migrant students' efforts to compiete high school were producing positive results.

Another study, conducted by the Interstate Migrant Education Council, analyzed data from the Migrant Student Record Transfer System for calendar year 1985. These national data show the sharp decrease in the number of fulltime equivalent (FTE) enrollments for migrant students in first versus twelfth grade. In first grade there were more than 35,000 FTE enrollments among migrant students, but in twelfth grade, there were fewer than 15,000 FTE enrollments. These findings suggest an attrition rate greater than 57 percent (Interstate Migrant Education Council, 1987).

Whatever the exact statistics might be, these data clearly suggest that though the dropout rate is declining, it remains high. The national rate for migrant students, in fact, still appears to be far higher than national rates for African-American or Hispanic students generally (see Kaufman & Frase, 1990).

**Conditions that lead to early school leaving**

Migrant students face the same risks as many impoverished, disadvantaged, or otherwise handicapped students. But, as a group, migrant students are more intensely at risk than the general population (Migrant Attrition Project, 1987).

**Overage grade placement**, for example, is among the most important of these conditions. Analysis of data from the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS) indicates that, among current migrant students in grades 9-12, 50 percent were on grade level, 32 percent were one year below grade level, and 18 percent were two or more years below grade level. Thus, about half of all migrant students might reasonably be considered to be at risk of leaving school early (Migrant Education Secondary Assistance Project, 1989).

**Poverty** is another major condition that influences migrants to leave school early. De Mers (1988), for example, reports that the average income for a migrant family of 5.3 members was about $5,500 in 1988. The contribution of another working family member can help provide necessities the family would otherwise lack. Moreover, many migrant youth start families of their own as adolescents, a condition that provides a further incentive to leave school early. The lack of adequate child care services can keep such students from participating in retrieval programs.

**Interrupted school attendance** and lack of continuity in curriculum from that interruption of studies are additional conditions that raise the dropout rate for migrant students. These conditions mean that migrant students often do not accumulate the credits they otherwise would.

**Inconsistent recordkeeping** in the schools seems to contribute to this problem. Migrant students rely on MSRTS updates so that the record of credits *they have already earned* are accessible to schools they will attend in the future. If schools fail to enter credits earned by migrant students, school completion is more difficult than it need be. During the 1987-88 regular term school year, for example, only 22 percent of the current migrant students in grades 9-12 who (1) changed school districts and also (2) attended two or more schools carried full or partial credit on their MSRTS records (Migrant Education Secondary Assistance Project, 1989).

**Limited English proficiency** is also a major condition of risk (so far as completing school in the U.S. is concerned). The first language of many migrant students is not English. For example, Hispanic

students comprise 75 percent of all migrant students (Salerno, 1989). Among these, many are foreign-born and have had little or no schooling in their native countries. Mobility and school interruptions compound the problem.

**Effective features of dropout retrieval programs**

Salerno and Fink (1989) noted a number of program features that research has found benefit migrant youth. The characteristics are classified according to type of service:

- **Academics**—basic skills, enrichment (e.g., field trips and cultural events), English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction, placement options (home-study, residential, or commuter programs), and GED preparation;
- **Vocational training**—career awareness, job placement, post-employment counseling, and vocational courses; and
- **Support services**—child care, counseling and referral to social service agencies, self-concept development, stipends, and transportation.

**Examples of programs that address the needs of migrant students**

Not every program needs to incorporate each of the features listed above. To help guide efforts to improve programs or devise new ones, however, administrators and teachers can assess the needs of the students they serve against these features. Illustrative applications in existing programs are described below.

The **High School Equivalency Program** (HEP), funded by the Migrant Education Office of the U.S. Department of Education, provides migrant dropouts the chance to prepare for the GED high school equivalency diploma in a residential program on a college campus or in a commuter program. The 23 HEPs located across the nation offer counseling, tutoring, career information and job placement, transportation to and from the program site, and enrichment activities. Program cycles average 8 to 12 weeks. Some sites, moreover, offer GED instruction in Spanish. In residential programs, students receive room and board. In addition, they get small stipends during the program cycle.

The **Migrant Dropout Reconnection Program** (MDRP), based in Geneseo, New York, offers referral services to 16- to 21-year-old migrant dropout youth. A national hotline (1-800/245-5681 nationwide; 1-800/245-5680 in New York state) reconnects them to educational or vocational programs. Youth receive a monthly bilingual newsletter, REAL TALK, that encourages their reentry into a program. The newsletter provides information about health, career, and educational opportunities. It also features role models and youths' own writing. Bilingual educational clipsheets are also available to REAL TALK readers. The personal touch through hotline calls with counselors and followup letters gives many migrant youth the support they need to continue their schooling. A component of this program is GRASP (Giving Rural Adults a Study Program), a home-study GED course. Lack of transportation and child care, coupled with rural isolation and negative school experiences, make home-study both appealing to and feasible for migrant dropouts.

**Family literacy programs** are a much needed option for migrants. The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project, based in Louisville, Kentucky, and Migrant Education-funded Even Start, with programs in the states of Louisiana, New York, and Oregon, are examples that address intergenerational literacy. La Familia, with programs in California and Arizona, meets the educational and social services needs of the whole family through GED and ESL instruction, citizenship/amnesty classes, and information.

The **Migrant Alternative School** in Yakima, Washington, provides GED preparation in both English and Spanish, ESL instruction, basic skills, vocational training, counseling for employment and college planning, and some credit-bearing classes for students planning to return to high school. Since about 80 percent of the migrant students in this program have been educated in Mexico, the program's emphasis on GED preparation in Spanish is essential.

**Work-study** could be an effective feature of dropout retrieval programs for two reasons. First, it can help students develop new occupational skills, and, second, it can couple education with the income these students need. Unfortunately, few work-study programs are available as yet. Although not specific to migrant students, Project READY of Bettendorf, Iowa, is an example of a work-study program that places students in a job in the community for at least 15 hours a week and in school one day a week to work toward a high school diploma.

Further information about these and other programs is available from a variety of sources, including the ERIC database. (ERIC/CRESS staff will perform free searches for anyone; simply call 1-800/624-9120 and ask for "user services.")

**Overcoming risk among migrant students**

Dropout retrieval programs need to take steps to overcome the risks their students continue to face. Students need a variety of support services and vocational training, in addition to academics. Features of programs like those described in this Digest could be adapted to the diverse circumstances of migrant life, nationwide.

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